When Project Complexity Exceeds Expectations Lessons from the Vasa

Jon Beard

Follow this and additional works at: https://aisel.aisnet.org/irwitpm2022

This material is brought to you by the International Research Workshop on IT Project Management (IRWITPM) at AIS Electronic Library (AISeL). It has been accepted for inclusion in International Research Workshop on IT Project Management 2022 by an authorized administrator of AIS Electronic Library (AISeL). For more information, please contact elibrary@aisnet.org.
When Project Complexity Exceeds Expectations

Lessons from the Vasa

Jon W Beard jwbeard@iastate.edu

The Vasa was a Swedish warship that was intended to be the flagship of the reserve squadron for the Swedish navy during a period. During its construction the Vasa was the largest and most powerful ship in the Baltic region. The Vasa first set sail in the late afternoon on August 10, 1628, after Vesper services. It sank less than a mile (~1300-1400 m) into its maiden voyage. Approximately 30 people perished.

The construction of the Vasa was not an obvious problem project for it was a warship being built like many others. Yet, challenging issues that were not recognized or adequately addressed emerged during the project’s development. Dimensions were specified by the King, and the length of the ship changed several times during construction. Other requirements, such as the number and types of armament the Vasa should carry also were revised several times (i.e., scope creep). A successful, well-respected Dutch Master Shipwright, Henrik Hybertsson, was the project leader and designer, but a long illness and his subsequent death left his incompletely trained apprentices in charge of the project. Minimal documentation on the ship’s design were available after Hybertsson’s death. Concerns about the height and width of the ship were raised during construction, and a stability test was performed by the supervising Admiral, but the poor performance of the ship in the test was never communicated to the builders. Supply chain problems for materials, including delays in producing the ornamentation and armament, led to construction delays. Many ships in that era required several weeks or months of shakedown voyages to correct and resolve design deficiencies before a ship was fully operational; the Vasa had no such opportunity. The King demanded an accelerated completion and delivery of the ship or “... those responsible would be subject to His Majesty’s disgrace.” These issues, among others, are explored as exemplars of challenges of project management.

Session Takeaways:

- Supporting examples of common critical success factors
- Subtle (often overlooked) critical success factors
- Misunderstanding / Misinterpreting existing complex processes, procedures, and systems
- Recognizing As-Is constraints (i.e., recognizing limitations created by the existing environment)